

Building the perfect platoon

Two platoons are set to test a new operations concept that boosts small-unit combat power

By Christian Lowe

Two infantry platoons are set to begin a training package that Corps leaders say will make them smarter, deadlier and better equipped to operate more independently on the battlefield than ever before.

Once they've honed their commando-style tactics and loaded their packs with new high-speed communications gear, weapons and more, they'll join their battalions on deployments that will take at least one to the war zone to put this training to the combat test.

Known as "distributed operations," the concept has developed its share of true believers, converts and skeptics since it was publicly unveiled a year ago. Now, platoons from the Hawaii-based 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines, and possibly the Camp Pendleton, Calif.-based 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, will show the Corps how it works.

And when they do, pay attention, because Corps officials hope to have an interim plan in place to train and equip units across the service for distributed operations by October 2006.

Distributed operations is not about high-tech, whiz-bang new electronics and Buck Rogers laser guns, those involved with the emerging strategy say. It's about giving more Marines the simple tools and the training to be more effective warriors. It's about training fire team leaders to be squad leaders. It's about emphasizing patrolling, reconnaissance and mobility. And it's about empowering Marines at the small-unit level to employ a wider range of the Marine Air Ground Task Force's combat power when their squad is in a pinch.

"What we believe is that, because of the tremendous competence of these small-unit leaders that we have today, we're going to be able to train them and equip them in ways that will enable them to operate with less dependence on their next higher headquarters," said Col. Len Blasiol, director of the concepts and doctrine division with Marine Corps Combat Development Command at Quantico, Va.

"We can spread the decision-making and authority across a larger number of brains. ... That will enable us to think and act faster than the enemy."

Blasiol discussed the concept May 26 at a wide-ranging Small Unit Excellence Conference sponsored by the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab at Quantico.

As for the new equipment, expect to see gear that is now common only among the Corps' more high-speed units. Rifle suppressors, hand-held Global Positioning System receivers, intrasquad radios and bipods are common in recon or special operations units, but if planners have their way, every Marine infantryman - and even some in supporting jobs, such as motor transport and military police - will pack these items in their rucksacks.

The first platoon to deploy with distributed operations training and equipment will be 1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 1/3, followed soon after by an as-yet unnamed platoon from 5th Marines that will likely deploy with the Okinawa, Japan-based 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit next year.

But the costs, in terms of both dollars and manpower changes, are daunting, officials admit. Freeing up the time for more Marines to attend the squad leader's course, funneling more platoon commanders through Tactical Air Control Party school and finding the range space to hone distributed operations skills are barely within reach.

Still, Corps leaders are determined to make it work and are building on momentum from small-unit leaders in the combat zone who see distributed ops as the way of the future.

"We want to avoid a lull," said Lt. Col. Chris Carolan, who heads the distributed operations implementation effort for the Warfighting Lab, at the May 26 conference. "We have a concern that we do a lot of experimentation, we learn a lot of great things and we pat ourselves on the back, and if we start from a dead stop to implement this, it's going to take a long time.

"We can't afford to do that. We don't have the time to do that. We're working on implementation right now."

How it works

The foundation of distributed operations is simple. By taking the basic building blocks of the rifle platoon and reorganizing them just a bit, planners hope to create a more adaptive platoon that can better fight as smaller, squad-sized units.

Each platoon would include two four-man command groups and three 12-man squads. Each squad would have a four-man "command and control" fire team headed by the squad leader.

And that's where the meat of the plan comes in.

A squad's command-and-control team will now be responsible for coordinating fire support for the squad. The corporal team leader serves as the squad's fires chief and can call in aircraft for close-air support or helicopter pickup.

To make air support calls, each squad will have PRC 148 VHF/UHF radios, satellite communications gear and PRC-117 radios to communicate with higher headquarters, if needed. For transport, the squad will travel on three internally transportable vehicles - essentially mini-Humvees - equipped with an M2 .50-caliber machine gun, an M240G medium machine gun and an Mk-19 40mm grenade launcher.

Marine officials say that some communications gear and vehicles outlined in the current plan may be substituted with others that are less expensive or more widely available, but that the principles of over-the-horizon communications and mobility will remain.

When 1/3 deploys to Afghanistan early next year, for example, the distributed ops platoon will traverse the rugged Afghan countryside in Humvees instead of the mini-Humvees outlined in the plan.

Smarter Marines

Distributed ops cannot succeed without boosting training and education for Marines at the squad level. Planners want to push decision-making deeper into the squad, giving every grunt the skills to be an effective "strategic corporal" or even lance corporal, officials say.

So when distributed ops is implemented, all squad leaders, fire team leaders and promising team members will go through the infantry squad leader's course.

"In the blink of an eye, a [fire team leader] can become a squad leader," said Vince Goulding, director of the Warfighting Lab's Sea Viking Division, which runs the DO experimentation, in a May 16 interview. "Frankly, a lot of the things we're asking him to do as a fire team leader may have been resident at the squad level before. So we're kicking it down a level."

Platoon sergeants will attend the infantry unit leaders course and will accompany the platoon commander to the Tactical Air Control Party school to learn how to call in close-air support, "and we might try to take it a step below that, [sending] squad leaders," Goulding added.

Other squad members will attend the crew-served weapons course and the combat lifesaver course, dialing up the expertise of nearly every grunt.

When all that's done, the platoon will attend a specially crafted Small Unit Enhancement Training course. Developed by the Warfighting Lab, the six-week course focuses on small-unit leadership and communications through intensive

patrolling. It is during this phase that the platoon will learn how to incorporate its new radios, weapons and transportation.

The platoon also will receive a limited amount of live-fire training and experimentation with supporting arms and combined arms support at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif., said Maj. Daniel Schmitt, a Warfighting Lab official who is coordinating the training.

The pre-deployment training will culminate in a “limited objective experiment” to put the distributed operations concept to the test. For the 1/3 platoon, that means heading to Fort Hunter Liggett, north of Santa Barbara, Calif., while the rest of the battalion goes through a combined arms exercise about 400 miles away at Twentynine Palms, in October.

“We want to take a look at the distances involved there. ... It will challenge our communications and a lot of other things” related to distributed operations, Goulding said. “The last thing we’re interested in doing here is cooking the books on a unit going to Afghanistan.”

All of the scenarios in the experimentation will focus on asymmetrical threats and include a mock battlefield with nonstate combatants as well as civilians, Schmitt said.

Role players and opposing-force members will be given special training and will operate spontaneously based on their roles and general guidance, he added.

What DO can do

All this training and gear will yield a rifle platoon with significantly greater combat power, Marine officials say.

Though much of the training a DO platoon receives will seem familiar to veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq, the formal education and equipment package of distributed ops will make some “ad hoc” arrangements standard.

The distributed ops platoon will be trained for missions such as:

- Mounted and dismounted combat patrols at extended ranges.
- Interdiction and destruction of enemy forces using fire support assets or direct assault.
- Securing and holding key terrain at extended ranges, such as landing zones, bridges, road junctions and hilltops.
- Conducting initial terminal guidance for helicopters and landing craft and provide guides to the main force.

- Conducting zone reconnaissance patrols in greater depth and breadth.
- Controlling key avenues of approach and isolating a target area in support of the main force or for a specific mission.

The plan could cost more than \$400 million if the Corps outfits all active and Reserve infantry battalions with the personal gear list and platoon communications gear, Carolan said. That price tag does not include the 11 vehicles per platoon the plan envisions, he added.

Manpower officials also are tackling the challenges of scheduling and finding classroom space for a potential five-fold boost in attendance at some infantry schools.

At the same time, officials are considering new ways to keep infantrymen in their units longer and boost retention, maintaining the all-important unit cohesion that makes a Marine platoon effective over the long term, according to Col. Mike Applegate, chief of plans and policy for Manpower and Reserve Affairs at Quantico.

Planners stressed that while distributed ops will have a large impact throughout the Corps, the service isn't changing how it does business - it's just adding new capabilities.

Marines still will be trained to execute large-scale, battalion-level operations, but they also will have the training and equipment to be a factor when they are part of smaller units that are spread out across the battlefield.

In the war on terrorism, the decisions of a lance corporal at a checkpoint or a platoon leader in Fallujah can turn the tide of the war if the wrong building is targeted in an air strike or an Italian journalist is shot while speeding toward his position, retired Army Maj. Gen. Robert Scales said at the May 26 seminar.

The distributed ops concept "increases a unit's ability to operate for a long time in [enemy] country," said Scales, a former commandant of the Army War College and a military historian. "The ability of our small units to perform is the crux of this war."

To turn its emphasis to the individual infantryman instead of on high-tech systems is the right move for the Corps, Scales said.

"The revolution needs to be led by the Marine Corps," he said. "You guys should shoulder the burden for everyone."